

Like Never Before: The Greeting Card

Preached by

Rev. Linda D. Even

United Church of Fayetteville

December 6, 2020

Hebrew Scripture Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11

¹Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

³A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." ⁶A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. ⁷The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. ⁸The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

⁹Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Gospel Reading: Mark 1:1-8

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" ⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Meditation: Like Never Before: The Greeting Card

Once upon a time, there was a family living through a pandemic, pretty much like any other family and, of course, unique in their own way. This is another part of the story of Jess, Brian, Lexi and SHAWN.

Jess was leaning against the wall, next to the recycling bin, sorting yesterday's mail. They'd been so busy they never went near the mailbox. She tossed all the advertisements and solicitations, before going into the den to sort of the rest of the mail: bills on Brian's desk and another handful of greeting cards. As she sat down to read them, she thought these cards were arriving earlier and in greater

numbers than in previous years. No doubt, she'd soon see an article on her newsfeed that this was happening because people had more time. Seriously?! People didn't have more time; they had more time at home; it wasn't the same thing.

The enclosed Christmas letters were starting to blur together, however. Happily, only a few people they knew had their jobs impacted and they really didn't know anyone ("yet", she supposed she should say) who had COVID-19. People mentioned these things in passing. She thought everyone ought to be thankful for the lighter touch the pandemic had on their lives than on those of many others. Most gave gratitude lip-service, but she wondered.

As usual, the longer parts of the letters focused on family events. Where people used to try to name as many fantastic accomplishments as possible, this year they seemed to be trying to outdo each other with how their lives had been disrupted. She knew it was only her opinion, but having a vacation delayed was a disappointment; it wasn't a tragedy. She felt for couples who had to postpone or cancel a wedding – that was certainly a disruption of much more of a once-in-a-lifetime experience. But her heart really went out to people who had had a loved one die and couldn't have a funeral. Even if you didn't feel it at other times, when people gathered to honor and give thanks for someone's life, you knew how important it was to be connected to other people and what a difference that made in all of life.

Jess put the cards and letters in the basket where other family members would look through them at their leisure. She looked at their own stack of yet to be prepared Christmas greeting cards. Maybe it was a mistake to critique other people's offerings when they hadn't made their own yet. She sighed and stood up, heading to the kitchen to prepare dinner.

...

The four of them were at the table. Shawn had done a nice job with the candle lighting and his prayer that recalled this morning's communion. He was the youngest, but also the practical theologian among them. He had a knack for making connections between church and the rest of life.

After all these months, their dinner table conversations seemed richer somehow. They couldn't fall back on, "How was your day?" because like it or not, they knew how everyone's day had gone. They talked about "real stuff" as Lexi put it.

Jess was still worrying about those Christmas cards and talked about her reaction to them, and then wondered what to write in their own cards. She asked everyone to name something they did that they thought should be in the letter. One by one, Brian's, Lexi's and Shawn's mouths opened and then closed without saying anything. They looked at each other and shrugged. Well, that was a big help. They passed the serving dishes around, the silence broken only by the clink of flatware on the plates.

It was Shawn who broke the silence. "I don't think we should write about ourselves." "Well, who do you think we should write about?" Brian asked.

"Them," replied Shawn.

Murdering good grammar, Jess asked, "Them, who?"

"The people we are writing to."

"I don't understand."

"Well," Shawn continued, "We send Christmas cards to people we like, right? People who are important to us?"

"Yees."

"So let's tell them that instead. Let's tell them we miss them and why we like them. That they are important to us."

"Hey yeah," said Lexi. "We could write about things that we like to do together, like going to the holiday movie with your college friends on the day after Thanksgiving."

"Or the Easter egg hunt at Grammom and Poppop's."

"Playing in the snow with our cousins."

"The fourth of July picnic at Uncle Tom's."

“How Aunt Sue always finds the best present – the thing you didn’t even know you wanted.”

“Grandpa’s puns.”

“Sleepovers with Grandma when we can stay up all night if we want.”

“How your Mom always tells me she couldn’t imagine a better son-in-law. It’s time I told her what a great mother-in-law she is.”

“Hugs.”

“Pizza night.”

“How they come to every school play.”

“And all my swim meets,” (which Jess generally considered to be a sacrifice above and beyond all reasonable expectation –an entire day on bleachers in a hot chlorine-soaked room.)

They weren’t silent now, and they talked over each other as all the ideas came flooding out.

Finally, the conversation trickled to a stop. Jess said, “Well, these are all wonderful ideas, but you know we talked about what we could write, but the truth is I always wrote the messages. There is no way I can do all that myself. Everyone will have to help.”

They all leapt in saying they would help, and it would be fun. For the next two weeks, the whole family wrote Christmas greetings to people they cared about and missed and looked forward to seeing again. And so it was that Jess, Brian, Lexi and Shawn lived in communion with those they loved, near and far, ever after in the season of Advent.